

# MARYLAND BIRDLIFE

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## A TRIP TO SMITH POINT OSPREY COLONY

Wind for motive power; the blue waters of Chesapeake Bay for highway; and a sturdy little sailing boat for craft. A small tent that leaked only when it rained, a small, well-selected camping outfit, and such foodstuffs as could be obtained without leaving the current ration coupons as scarce as cow-birds' nests. So it was that the skipper, in the person of Gilbert C. Klingel, and the writer, set sail on a hot July morning at Annapolis. Destination — Smith Point, where the Little Wicomico joins forces with its big brother, the Potomac, to make the grand entry into the bay. Object — the pleasure of a leisurely sailing and camping cruise down the bay and return, and the study and observation of a colony of Ospreys and their nests located on the Point.

The first day passed until late afternoon without much of ornithological interest. And without much wind! So we were becalmed most of the day. An occasional Laughing Gull appeared overhead, and, at one point, in a group of fish net stakes, the top of nearly every stake was surmounted by a Gull, some adult and some immature, appearing as listless as the stakes themselves. Had some food been tossed overboard, their apathy would undoubtedly have quickly vanished. A couple of the stakes were occupied by Ospreys which watched our approach and departure very warily. No undue familiarity for them. Along toward evening heavy, black clouds began to appear in the southwest and the skipper announced that a squall was imminent. The wind freshened up a bit, but in the wrong direction for us. However, by tacking, we began to make some progress.

And then came the ornithological highlight of the day. About a mile south of Chesapeake Beach, approximately a quarter mile from the shore, at the entrance to a little bay, we sighted a fe-

male Common Loon, floating on the water. Even in the dimming light due to the gathering storm and fading daylight her identity was unmistakable. Conjecture could only be made as to why she was there at that time of year, July 1st, and as to the cause of her isolation. She seemed to be in good physical condition at the time, although she made no attempt to fly. At our approach she did, however, make the usual long underwater dives, characteristic of the species.

The storm struck with such violence that, because of the turbulence of the water, we were forced to cast out the anchor some distance from the shore and bed down in the bottom of the boat.

The wind continued all through the next day -- in the wrong direction for us. Being compelled to tack to gain any headway we were unable to come near enough to the shore to observe any land birds, so had to be content with an occasional Osprey flying overhead, a solitary Bald Eagle, a few Fish Crows and Laughing Gulls, and a small flock of terns. Positive identification was impossible but the few definite markings observed indicated them to be Common Terns.

Again in the late afternoon a violent squall struck us. Although the rain continued most of the night, the wind shortly died down and we were able to anchor the boat and wade ashore with some of the camping equipment for the night. Then we learned about the tent!

The next morning a clear sky and the wind in the right quarter, and we were merrily on our way. Ospreys began to be more plentiful. A couple of Bald Eagles were observed flying over the woods near the shore. During the early forenoon one group of three and another of two American Egrets were seen flying a short distance inland, quite low, headed north. Apparently they were on their post-nesting wandering expedition.

About mid-forenoon we anchored at Cove Point, at the mouth of the Patuxent River, where, for years a colony of Least Terns have been known to nest. This colony only a few years ago had become decimated to about six or eight pairs. Recently, though, they have been gradually increasing in numbers. We saw approximately fifty to sixty birds on the ground and in the air over the nesting site. There probably were many more out over the Bay foraging for food. Our purpose in stopping at this point was to search for nests and eggs or young. Many depressions on the surface of the ground where presumably eggs had been hatched were found, but no eggs or nestlings. The birds were all very active and vociferously resented our intrusion. The wide beach, facing south, and the isolation of the vicinity would seem to make this an ideal tern nesting area.

By early afternoon we had reached the Potomac and a couple of hours later, had arrived at our destination. Even without maps or charts we would have known that this was the location we were seeking by the abundance of Ospreys flying about and the numbers of their nests in the trees covering the area. Selecting a shady spot near the water we hauled our gear ashore and made camp.

The area selected by the Ospreys for their colony extends for probably a mile on the east fronting the bay, about half that distance on the north along the Little Wicomico, to a marsh along almost the entire western edge. Although there are human habitations within a short distance and fishermen constantly use the surrounding waters, the solitude of the tract seems seldom to be intruded upon. No indications that man ever ventures on this spot were found. Many of the trees of the area, mostly yellow pine, are of a low stunted growth without central trunk and with the lower branches resting on the ground. Others are of the typical, upright growth and very tall. There is little ground cover as the ground floor is of sand, swept immaculately clean by the prevailing winds and possibly by storm-driven tidal waters.

The Ospreys have apparently shown no preference as to the character of the tree in which they build, requiring only branches or limbs strong enough to support the weight of the nest. Those in low, deformed ones are built in the center of the scrawny growth, some not over twenty feet above the ground, others were so low that a person by tip-toeing can almost look into the center of the nest. The heights of the nests in the taller trees seem only to be limited by the strength of the supporting branches. It seems characteristic that in practically every case the nest is built as near the center of the tree as possible. In the taller trees there generally is a canopy of branches and leaves over the nest; whether for shade or concealment, or whether these considerations have any bearing is a matter of speculation. The nests in the stunted trees have no shade and no concealment, the birds apparently relying on the isolation of the area for protection.

There is nothing particularly elegant or delicate about an Osprey's nest. They do seem to give, however, the feeling of stability. They are seldom the huge ponderous affairs that eagles' nests sometimes attain, although some are quite massive. We examined several that had been built near the ground in tops of the low stunted trees. Typical was one that was composed of old driftwood, dried twigs, pieces of cornstalks, tree bark, bamboo sticks, pieces of sponge, short lengths of rope, a cork float from an old seine, and lined with dead grass roots, dried grass and some sea-weed. Another was lined with green moss, and an old rag. Some of the nests had become so bulky and heavy that the limbs supporting them had yielded, letting all the mass of material above settle down and, in some cases, break away from one side of the nest. At least a few of these broken nests appeared to have been patched up to some degree and re-used.

We investigated nest after nest trying to find young and had almost decided we were too late in the season. Ultimately our attention was attracted by a pair of adults circling and screaming excitedly overhead above a particular group of trees. By noting the location of what seemed to be the center of their gyrations and converging on that spot, we were soon able to pick out the exact tree upon which the birds were focusing their vociferous attention. The nest was about thirty feet above the ground but the intervening branches barred our ascent without benefit of axe. Fortunately, another tall tree of more open structure stood some forty or fifty feet away. On climbing this tree to a height a little above the nest we discovered two young birds still in their gray downy plumage but showing the characteristic black markings about the head. Although the parents continued their wheeling and screaming, they made no attempt at direct attack.

Unluckily, the camera that had been brought along for such events as this had become wet during the storms encountered on the way. The moisture had ruined the bellows and covering, so it could not be used.

No definite statement can be made as to the exact number of nests in the colony. It would undoubtedly exceed a hundred. By standing in one clearing we counted over twenty-five aeries in the surrounding trees.

From the time of our arrival and until our leaving, Ospreys were almost constantly flying about overhead. Some circled about as if they had nowhere in particular to go, while others seemed bent on some destination. Many were carrying nesting material of various sorts; one was observed carrying a stick fully three feet long. Since nesting had certainly been completed for several weeks this activity seemed strange. No other particular interest in their nests, except in the instance previously mentioned, was observed. Numerous individuals were seen to fly out over the water, dip for a fish, and then fly around for a considerable time with the fish in his talons. Could it have been that the captor was waiting for the victim to die before eating it? One was noticed carrying a good sized eel. Another made a blunder in swooping down and catching a fish while a Bald Eagle was perched on a fish net stake nearby. The eagle was waiting for just such an opportunity. He immediately gave chase, whereupon the Osprey dropped his prey. The eagle then seized the falling fish in mid-air and flew away.

During their flying, they kept up an incessant calling and screaming. That these flights extended far into the night was indicated by the shrieking from overhead whenever we happened to waken. They utter a variety of calls, the most common one resembling that of a Killdeer, only slightly faster. All their calls are very highly pitched.

There were, of course, other birds of interest in the area.

One morning we were delighted to see about twenty double-crested Cormorants perched on top of stakes supporting a fish net enclosure. Occasionally one would drop to the water and grab a fish. The movement of the fish as it was being swallowed could be detected by the downward progress of a large bulge from the bird's throat to the base of the neck. An occasional Bald Eagle, either adult or immature, would pass over. However, the scarcity of this species during the entire trip was a subject of much speculation, and certainly of disappointment. A Great Blue Heron would at times majestically sail over. One was seen near camp carrying a Puffer Fish in his great beak. Several little Green Herons apparently inhabited the district as they were often seen.

But the tide of our time was running out. A brief stop at Solomons Island. A friendly visit with the staff at the Chesapeake Biological Laboratory. Another fruitless stop at Cove Point to search for Least Tern's eggs. An indifferent wind, and the trip was over.

Ray Beasley

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BIRD TRIP TO THE PATUXENT WILD LIFE REFUGE  
October 26, 1945

This trip was so intensely interesting from start to finish that it is very difficult to report it briefly yet adequately. Mr. Bruce Overington received us in Laurel. Mr. Robert Stewart and Mr. Chandler Robbins were most willing and efficient leaders at the Refuge.

As soon as we entered the laboratory we were shown a Kinglet and asked to identify a sparrow (White-crowned). Both birds had just been banded, were kept to be shown to us, then released.

Mr. Stewart then showed charts and records of studies being carried on at the Refuge. Since those present hoped he would repeat this at the December meeting for the benefit of the whole society, I'll not describe them. We were then shown skins of birds collected on the reservation itself and another collection from the entire country. The skins of the Bald and Golden Eagle were particularly admired. Not only are skins and eggs collected but also there is a series of bird skeletons — each skeleton in its box with all bones numbered.

We were given a quick tour through the rest of the laboratory and then led by Mr. Stewart, assisted by Mr. Roberts, we went for a three mile observation trip, visiting first one of the bird



traps, then going along the Patuxent to Beech Island, circling back so as to get a glimpse of the swamp and pine woods bird life. Mr. Stewart showed us many flowers, shrubs, nests and trees, among the latter an Overcup Oak, the largest in the country.

The bird list, including those heard and seen was:

Wood Duck	Hermit Thrush
Golden Eagle	Bluebird
Turkey Vulture	Golden-crowned Kinglet
Sharp-shinned Hawk	Ruby-crowned Kinglet
Coopers Hawk	Starling
Red-tailed Hawk	English Sparrow
Mourning Dove	Red-winged Blackbird (Female)
Flicker	Purple Grackle
Red-bellied Woodpecker	Cowbird
Hairy Woodpecker	Cardinal
Blue Jay	Goldfinch
Crow	Vesper Sparrow
Carolina Chickadee	Junco
Tufted Titmouse	Chipping Sparrow
White-breasted Nuthatch	Field Sparrow
Red-breasted Nuthatch	White-crowned Sparrow
Winter Wren	White-throated Sparrow
Mockingbird	Fox Sparrow
Catbird	Swamp Sparrow
Robin	Song Sparrow

As we returned to the laboratory, Mr. Roberts saw a speck just above the horizon. He made a record dash into the building for a telescope. The speck turned out to be a Golden Eagle.

We all asked for another trip in the spring not only to see the birds but also some of the twelve species of orchids and other wild flowers found at the Refuge.

Florence H. Burner

## MARYLAND ORNITHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Organized April 9, 1945

"The object of this Club shall be to record the observations of bird life in Maryland; to disseminate in a popular manner the results of such observations; to collate the scientific data furnished by bird students throughout the State, and to supply such available information to other groups as requested; and to promote the cultivation of public sentiment in the preservation of our native bird life."

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